

Kunapipi

Volume 16 | Issue 2

Article 8

1994

'The World Is Your People': The Time of the Peacock and the Evolution of an Australian Identity

Amin Malak

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Malak, Amin, 'The World Is Your People': The Time of the Peacock and the Evolution of an Australian Identity, *Kunapipi*, 16(2), 1994.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss2/8>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

'The World Is Your People': The Time of the Peacock and the Evolution of an Australian Identity

Abstract

To Doireann MacDermott I owe the pleasure of being introduced to Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew's engaging collection of stories, *The Time of the Peacock*.¹ She gave a sympathetic reading to the book at a session of the 1988 EACLALS conference in Nice, and due to my interest in the discourse of Muslim fiction in English, her paper prompted me to examine the text. My article here represents a sequel to Doireann MacDermott's informative discussion that appeared in the conference's proceedings.²

AMIN MALAK

'The World Is Your People': *The Time of the Peacock* and the Evolution of an Australian Identity

To Doireann MacDermott I owe the pleasure of being introduced to Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew's engaging collection of stories, *The Time of the Peacock*.¹ She gave a sympathetic reading to the book at a session of the 1988 EACLALS conference in Nice, and due to my interest in the discourse of Muslim fiction in English, her paper prompted me to examine the text. My article here represents a sequel to Doireann MacDermott's informative discussion that appeared in the conference's proceedings.²

The Time of the Peacock contains twelve stories, eleven of which are set in rural Australia, while the last one, 'A Long Way', takes place in rural Pakistan. While most 'third-world' immigrant writers in developed countries deal with urban issues, it is particularly fascinating to read such an intimate portrayal of rural experiences.³ These simple, sequential yet subtle and interlocked stories project the perspectives of Indian Muslims who originally arrived in rural Australia in the second half of the last century; their initial job was to train camels across the wilderness, settling afterwards as farmers. During the era of The White Australia Policy, these Indian Muslims were curiously referred to as 'Afghans' stereotyping 'all who wore turbans, exotic attire and shared the Moslem [sic] faith, quite irrespective of their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds'.⁴

These interlinked stories, in which characters from one family often reappear in different episodes, are given focus by the maturing voice of its sensitive, observant narrator, Nimmi. Her endearing energy, imagination, and inquisitiveness – for which she is teasingly labelled 'the questioner' (p. 5) and 'the dreamy one' (p. 11) – propels the narrative forward. Significantly, Nimmi affirms precisely and distinctively her ethnicity: 'I, young as I was, could see the whole of my life as strange – a dark girl in a white man's country, a Punjabi Muslim in a Christian land' (p. 21). This stark statement lends credence to the notion that one's ethnicity does not refer 'to a thing-in-itself but to a relationship ... typically based on *contrast*',⁵ which is here distinguished on the basis of colour, gender, national origin, and religion, with the latter receiving a somewhat accentuated emphasis in the collection as a whole.

Throughout, the contrast manifests itself in terms of us and them, and in terms of what is judged to be properly Muslim as distinct from what is perceived to be typically Australian. In order to preserve their cultural values and practices, the Indian Muslims resort to the defensive attitude of constructing family-centred cocoons whereby they inhabit an approximation of life in India. To overcome their alienation, they develop a special affiliation with the landscape by inventing a semblance of India. Nimmi's mother creates a garden of Indian flowers as 'her own little walled-in country' (p. 2). This symbolic attachment to the new/old land is enhanced by a corresponding intimacy with the animals that are given dignified Indian names or referred to in familial or endearing terms: the eagle is a 'High Maharajah' (p. 53); the vixen is Kumari, a princess; Shah-Jehan, the peacock, is Nimmi's 'little brother' (p. 7); the imaginary, wise tiger is 'Grandfather Tiger'; and the little bird 'Russilla' is 'a friend, from heaven' (p. 13). Marginalized as they are, the Indian Muslims find the animals friendlier and the landscape more hospitable than some of the Australians who call them 'Niggers' (in 'Because of the Russilla') and mock their dress and food (in 'Grandfather Tiger').

As a parallel to these occasional instances of racism, the narrative, significantly, highlights acts of affection and solidarity on the part of other Australians who befriend the Indians, respect their religion, and make them feel 'like relations' (p. 19). Interestingly, in 'The Singing Man' the narrative commingles the Indians' nostalgia for their Kashmir or Punjab with the yearnings of the wandering Irish accountant, Paddy-the-Drunk, singing and pining for the green meadows of Ireland. Likewise, the counter-poising of the narrative about the Australian 'bushranger' Thunderbolt with that of the Punjabi 'dacoit' Malik Khan (through the technique of story-within-story in 'The Outlaw') signals similarities in honourable codes of conduct among people of all races, even among those who are compelled to resort to the extremes of violence.

More importantly, the narrative foregrounds the diversity in the response of the Indian Muslims to their 'foreignness' in Australia, problemizing in the process the lack of uniformity in the manner of their affirmation of ethnicity. In 'The Child that Wins', we witness a range of attitudes with regard to Hussein and Anne's marriage. Hussein's father, supported by Nimmi's favourite, comic-relief-figure Uncle Seyid – not a relative, but her father's close friend – opposes it. The father worries (perhaps too presciently) that the children of a cross-ethnic marriage 'belong nowhere' (p. 74), neither Indians, Muslims, nor Australians; the well-meaning traditionalist Uncle Seyid believes that a Muslim should marry only someone from his faith because 'your own is your own' (p. 74) and 'what was right was right forever, and that what was Muslim was always right' (p. 73). On the other hand, Nimmi's parents, whose own marriage symbolizes a striking, syncretic marriage of a Muslim to a Brahmin, give a cautious, tacit endorsement to the marriage. Their attitude reflects a certain sophisticated,

reconciliatory idealism rooted in Nimmi's mother's vague principle that 'people are people' and in Nimmi's father's declaration that 'If you stay anywhere long enough ... people get used to you. They take you in to their houses and their ways' (p. 74). Of course, Hussein's action signifies, alternatively, a readiness for organic integration justified by both genuine bonding and pragmatism. The conflict is resolved through cleverly confluenting these diverse streams with the birth of a baby, heralding hope and harmony.

'The Child that Wins' underscores the necessity to change and adapt to the realities and exigencies of immigration. While the discourse reveals an obvious pride in the characters' sense of their ethnicity and empathy for their *angst* over losing it in an alien, at times hostile, culture, a centrifugal tendency simultaneously emerges amongst them pointing towards merging with the new culture without necessarily deracinating themselves. This issue becomes prominent when the education of children – the new generation of Australian-born Muslims – is concerned. In 'The Babu from Bengal' the foresighted Wali Husson urges his friends to send their children to Australian schools to learn and to integrate into their new society, so as to spare the parents the exploitation of the Babu, a half-literate conniving clerk:

The white people send their children to school. We send ours to work in the paddocks. The white children are learning to choose. Ours are learning to be farmers, peasants, people the Babu can use to make money from. This is because their fathers are stubborn and dislike change. (p. 89)

What is being articulated here is not merely a strategy for survival, but a genuine willingness to meet the other and to emulate qualities that the Muslims can comprehend and relate to such as the pursuit of learning. The narrative affirms throughout this spirit of change by foregrounding compromise and acceptance of their new identity as Australians while cherishing their Indian heritage: the triple sets of binary oppositions along the axes of time, space and ethnic barriers (then/now, there/here, and us/them) are thus deftly defused and reconciled through such statements as 'The old ways were good, but the new ways are better' (p. 104). Similarly, in the story 'High Maharajah', the gravid act of reconstructing a damaged kite, from Indian bamboo reed and Australian paper (potent symbols for cultural roots and acquired identity) making the hybridized 'Australian kite sing' (p. 57), signals the evolvment of a new composite personality, expressing 'a distinctively Asian-Australian sensibility that is part of Australia's history'.⁶ Accordingly, the discourse of *The Time of the Peacock* functions, to extend Edward Said's musical metaphor, 'contrapuntally';⁷ it suggests, perhaps a little idyllically, that compromise is quite possible when exercising flexibility and foresight. Significantly, one can see that all the concessions are one-sided: the minority has to be accommodative of the majority.

The ethos of tolerance and compassion culminate in the last story 'A Long Way'. Evoking in the reader's mind Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the story operates allegorically through the metaphor of an arduous journey undertaken by a Pakistani mother determined to send a jumper she has made for a son who studies in Australia; as she tries to arrive in Karachi on time to hand-deliver it to a friend departing for Australia, this Muslim mother meets believers from other religions (Hindus, untouchables, and a Christian priest) who all show her affection and admiration. Like a carefully-conceived allegory, the story, and with it the whole collection, concludes almost didactically by building up towards the book's central statement that appears in the last page: 'the world is all our people' (p. 112); this all-embracing insight confirms Nimmi's innocently pastoral vision of a child, articulated in the book's first sentence, 'the world was our farm and we were all loved.'

Deflecting confrontational conditions, the ambience of universal *détente* that permeates *The Time of the Peacock* makes it, as one Australian reviewer for the *Bulletin* aptly affirmed, 'that kind of book: to be passed on within a family, with love.'⁸ The book's fascinating thematics thus progresses from the 'dissociative sense'⁹ that emphasizes ethnic distinctiveness being jealously guarded in a daunting environment of immigration/exile towards an integrative ethos that embraces and celebrates a caring, compassionate humanity: as Rashida, Nimmi's mature sister and one of the book's privileged voices, insightfully declares: 'In all things beautiful Allah smiles' (p. 27).

NOTES

1. *The Time of the Peacock*. Stories by Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1965). Subsequent references are included in the text.
2. 'The Time of the Peacock: Indian Rural Life in Australia', in Jacqueline Bardolph, ed., *Short Fiction in the New Literatures in English* (Nice: Faculté des Lettres, 1989), pp. 203-09.
3. This reference to 'third-world' immigrant writers relates to Mena Abdullah. Since this collection of stories is of a joint authorship, it is hard to specify the role of each author in the construction of the work. One can venture an assumption based on the textual, semi-autobiographical content that the narrative material came from Mena Abdullah, while the writing was mostly done in collaboration with Ray Mathew. See also Yasmine Gooneratne 'Mena Abdullah, Australian Writer' in Sneja Gunew and Kateryna O. Longley, eds., *Striking Chords: Multicultural literary interpretations* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), p. 115. However, Gooneratne and two other critics deal with *The Time of the Peacock* as if it were almost exclusively written by Mena Abdullah: J.S. Ryan 'The Short Stories of Mena Abdullah', *The Literary Criterion* Vol. VI, No. 4 (Summer 1965), pp. 73-77; and Diana Brydon 'Discovering "Ethnicity": Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Mena Abdullah's *Time of the Peacock*', in Russell McDougall and Gillian Witlock, eds., *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives* (Melbourne: Methuen Australia, 1987), pp. 94-107.

4. MacDermott, op. cit., p. 203.
5. Werner Sollors 'Ethnicity', in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago and London: U. of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 288.
6. Gooneratne, op. cit., p. 118.
7. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. 66-67.
8. Maurice Shadbolt, quoted in Gooneratne, op. cit., p. 115.
9. Sollors, op. cit., p. 288.